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Hazards of Being a Male Breadwinner: Deadbeat Dads in the United States of the 1980s

*Felix Krämer**

Abstract: »Väter zwischen Schuldenmoral, Gericht und Medien in den USA der 1980er Jahre«. This article explores the "deadbeat dad" – fathers short on child support payments – as a contemporary figure originating in the Reagan era. It questions risks that were morally redirected in the 1980s, addressed towards particular groups of fathers and their relatives. After setting the question in relation to contemporary masculinity studies, the author brings "deadbeat dads" in line with the history of indebtedness and default. By scrutinizing how the claim to secure single mothers' alimony was integrated into a neoconservative project and the state's retreat from welfare in the United States, the paper analyses TV newscasts displaying the prosecution of delinquent fathers publicly. Adopting a discourse-analytical perspective, the author sketches out how the figure of the male breadwinner resonated in claims for economic and biological responsibility that were revived in the Reagan years. Exemplified by the context of the current case of Walter Scott, the contemporary history of child support debtors demonstrates how black fathers do not only face a higher risk of becoming victims of police violence, but also how ascribing default to African American fathers tied irresponsibility to black masculinity.

Keywords: Debt, deadbeat dads, delinquency, gender, media, contemporary US history.

1. Introduction

When, on April 4, 2015, a police officer shot Walter Scott, an African American in South Carolina, the political arena seemed shocked. At the time, there was still a heightened awareness in the American public of the week-long demonstrations against racist police violence that had taken place in Ferguson following the killing of an unarmed black teenager in August 2014. American media had covered the Ferguson story nationwide. In April 2015, a passer-by filmed the shooting of Walter Scott in North Charleston with his phone. However, there is a historical background to this story referring to media discourse on delinquent fathers thirty years earlier: Walter Scott had possibly been run-

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ning away because he had outstanding warrants for omission in paying child support, as the attorney of the Scott family Chris Stewart assumed. In addition, he acknowledged that Scott had been imprisoned for such an infringement in the past.¹ The problem of so-called “deadbeat dads” owing their ex-wives or the mothers of their children money and being prosecuted by police and justice had irremissibly emerged decades before media outlets began to discuss police violence against black lives. I will analyse the dynamics leading to cases like Walter Scott’s by demonstrating how these present cases are linked to the political culture of self-reliance and prosecution during the so-called Reagan era. Guiding my considerations will be the question of which historical shifts were entangling fatherhood, debt, and guilt in the 1980s.

The quest for deadbeat dads grew to an acute and nationwide issue within the US media landscape of the 1980s. Stalked by camera crews, fathers were threatened with garnishment of wages and coercive detention if they were unwilling, or unable, to pay their debts in the following decade. At first glance, this seems to indicate that single mothers severely suffered because of their ex-husbands’ irresponsibility. But did single mothers really fall into poverty and lose social status due to a contemporary lack of masculine liability starting in the 1970s or early 1980s? Which policy shift changed the everyday alimony stories from the 1970s to the 1980s? What were the new risks divorced couples, their children, and especially individual fathers faced in the so-called Reagan era?

In the 1980s, men who were accused of being in arrears with their alimony payments and maintenance increasingly risked ending up in jail (Brito 2012).² Despite this threat of punishment, single mothers were at much greater risk of sliding into poverty than in previous decades, for the state’s withdrawing of welfare payments vindicated this policy with a tougher criminal prosecution of delinquent fathers (Papke 2009; Hatcher 2012).³ Presumably Ulrich Beck did not have US society or particularly those two indebted and impoverished groups – namely, maintenance debtors and the mothers of their children – in mind when he published *Risikogesellschaft* in 1986. However, transnational entanglements of financial markets and the fluxion of debts and credits through the United States did not appear to be a pivotal problem at the time. Excessive

¹ See Yan and Botelho, 2015, Police shoot man in the back: Who was Walter Scott?, *CNN*, April 8 <<http://edition.cnn.com/2015/04/08/us/south-carolina-who-was-walter-scott/>> (Accessed March 22, 2016). See also: Sausser, 2015, Walter Scott dogged by system that “criminalizes” debt, *The Post and Courier*, April 10; and Robles and Dewan, 2015, Skip Child Support. Go to Jail. Lose Job. Repeat, *The New York Times*, April 19.

² Tonya Brito contextualizes the incarceration of maintenance debtors and poverty starting in the context of the Child Support Act of 1974 (2012, 622).

³ David Papke relates the enforcement of child support payments and the correlating legislation to class relations on a broader level. Daniel Hatcher traces contemporary child support policies to the historical “Bastardy Acts” legislation (2012, 777 et seq.). Furthermore, Hatcher shows how, in particular, the Social Security Act of 1974 became the basis for the battle between poor mothers, poor fathers, and the state (2012, 780).

indebtedness – whether collective or individual – was not in the first place a key concern of social scientists, and thus did not appear as an acute problem to contemporary social economists. Rather, extrinsic threats, such as nuclear power or the greenhouse effect, rising crime rates, and other threats seemed at the very heart of current endangerments in a new or “second modernity” (Beck 1986). However, other concepts such as ‘vulnerability’ delineated in the introduction of this special issue as well as the notion of risks materializing individually offer a better understanding of social differences (see Itzen and Müller 2016, in this HSR Special Issue). By shifting the focus from general perils to a perspective on hazards in everyday-life stories an interconnection of discrimination and moral politics arising in the political scene of the 1980s comes into view.

Neoconservative Republicans coming to office with Ronald Reagan in 1981 brought with them an optimistic – and, in some respects, euphemistic – view on the willingness and openness to risks in the contemporary United States. Coincidentally, this optimism was fused with the turn to a certain set of family values and morals in general. Religion in politics saw a revival, and the Evangelical movement driven by the belief in the approach of the Last Days soared (Diamond 1998; Harding 2000; Jewett 2008). Economic liberty and, of course, success – as a social imperative – were endemic to spaces of action, praising a nationalist return of the market, while debt markets internationalized their outreach dramatically (Hyman 2011; Chinn and Frieden 2012). Before his election, Ronald Reagan repeatedly preached the blessings of a free market. He was elected president as a ‘moral leader’ in his landslide victory against Jimmy Carter. In his Inaugural Address, on January 20, 1981, Reagan declared:

In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem. From time to time we’ve been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. Well, if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else?

Everybody should take care of him- or herself, Reagan claimed, aiming at old ideals by proclaiming that the 1970s would have been a decade of crisis of the ‘American spirit.’ From now on, government would only intervene in extreme cases, but using drastic measures – for instance through criminal prosecution of child support obligors. As a downside, openness to risk, entrepreneurship, self-rule, ideas of self-responsibility, and the state’s retreat from welfare and support of struggling families dominated both of Reagan’s terms in office from 1981-1989 (Stricker 2007, 183 et seq.). A diffuse belief had grown among political actors that prosecution would implement moral stability in society, including the male maintenance debtors’ requirement to pay alimony and child support. Gender was materialized economically via discourses referring to different roles among men and women. Biological fatherhood became a moral marker linked

to the status of a responsible breadwinner while the state's role was simultaneously reduced to the part of criminal prosecution of delinquent men.

By scrutinizing the publicly displayed examples revolving around delinquent fatherhood, and relating the formation to contemporary social history, the interconnection of gender and moralized indebtedness comes to the fore. Besides, the debt claim for alimony owed by biological fathers corresponded with the retreat of government and social transfers. But what did this turn in welfare policy towards prosecution of “deadbeat dads” mean to the affected people? When defaulting fatherhood and economical failure was fused and moralized publicly, predominantly poor men and African American fathers were targeted – to point this out preliminarily.⁴ However, the figure of the “absent father” as an African American man, who allegedly does not care for his family, is not an invention of the 1980s, but reaches back to deprivation and slavery in the history of the United States (Finzsch, Horton and Horton 1999). What implies the accusation to fail in breadwinning in a society considering a “male breadwinner” a central cultural figure? What does it mean to fail in this matter – allegedly by choice?

On the part of the gender axis, I am interested in the contemporary historical context – or to put it theoretically: the power operation, reframing the women's movement's concern for distressed single mothers to a neoliberal prosecution effort aiming at ‘irresponsibility.’ This subject formation facilitated the state's retreat from social services and, at the same time, redefined biological fatherhood as well as masculine leadership in families as an individual problem. Since the 1980s, the formation was played out publicly in court rooms, interviews, and news coverage. This discursive shift needs to be contextualized in the history of consumer's debts, the allocation of resources, and different credit access by various groups in the United States in the course of the twentieth century and beyond (Krämer 2016). The TV news coverage by the so-called “big three” – ABC, CBS, and NBC – simultaneously referenced the commonplace and publicly exemplified how indebtedness and guilt were produced in their contemptuous representation of these different men and fathers. This discursive formation intertwined gender order and class. Black and white fathers were treated separately, yet equally hounded.

Before I will move on and describe the media discourse on maintenance-indebted fathers within the main part of my article, I would like to discuss the complex of gender and economy from two perspectives. Firstly, I would like to reflect the focus on men, manhood, and masculinity against the backdrop of

⁴ At this point, Barack Obama's taking a keen stance on black male responsibility for their offspring in a Father's Day speech prior his presidency in 2008 is awaiting further considerations. The speech is remarkable since it introduced a criticism on allegedly irresponsible black male behaviour. See the homepage of the article in *The New York Times*: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/16/us/politics/15cnd-obama.html?_r=0> (Accessed August 20, 2015).

historical Men's Studies by aligning my account with the perspective of Critical Masculinity Studies. The men's movement had been developed and positioned as a dissociative demarcation to feminist endeavours and other emancipation movements in the United States in the 1970s. My analysis addresses the political challenge within masculinity studies in relation to the critical historiographical approach of masculinity (see Martschukat and Stieglitz 2008). Thus, using "fatherhood" as a lens enables historical access to contemporary US history, which is riddled with differences and varying positions in terms of guilt, debt, and narratives of owing somebody something economically as well as morally. Gender needs to be conceptualized as being interlocked with race and class. At this point, the concept of intersectionality seems useful as a tool to differentiate the history of masculinities and to relate it to my subject. Secondly, I historically locate the risk group of "deadbeat dads" with reference to debt and the politics of owing, tracing it back to the 1980s. This raises the argument that historical shifts sediment in the distribution of resources, economic debts, and prosecution that cannot be understood, on the one hand, outside the realm of a changing gender order and bio politics. On the other hand, morals and debt cannot be analysed without the historical change towards a neoliberal, neoconservative, self-reliant society which puts an emphasis on personal responsibility. Responsibility appears at this point as an 'empty signifier' yielding the production of hegemony as conceptualized by cultural theorist Ernesto Laclau (Laclau 2002; Krämer and Mackert 2010). The history of maintenance liability, therefore, is only in the second place part of the history of debtors. In the first place, it is a history of risks being reassigned from the state to the gender order. Participants living in non-conforming family relations in the 1980s again had to take a higher risk of falling into poverty – fathers, mothers, and, not least, their children. The media coverage of "deadbeat dads" that coedited the problem will be the focus of the main part of the article. In the light of this story, the history of indebted men in the United States of the 1980s can signify a historical shift in terms of economic distribution and liabilities, which is – in turn – deeply interwoven with the negotiation of gender relations.

2. Men's Role and Contemporary Gender Historiography

Shortly before maintenance-owing fathers entered the limelight of the 1980s media coverage, Herb Goldberg published *The Hazards of Being Male* in 1976, claiming that the ordinary man had nowadays become the major victim of all sorts of contemporary cultural shifts. By means of books such as Goldberg's, by the mid-seventies, the question of emancipation and equality was reassessing male identity and embedding masculinity in a crisis scenario revolving exclusively around a certain kind of the white heterosexual male (Robinson 2000). While the Civil Rights Movement as well as the women's and gay liber-

ation movements had effectively addressed marginalization and discrimination in the late 1960s and even earlier, the mid-1970s saw the rise of the ordinary man as the subject of all difficulties. Starting from men's magazines, to pseudo-scientific publications, or fiction, up to journalistic statements and various broadcasts, men and their problems were displayed as the major group of victims affected by all social changes and economic hardships (Krämer 2009). – Moreover, the particular crisis which struck hegemonic masculinity in the United States supposedly grew to a severe malady haunting society as a whole because leadership seemed to be affected (see Kimmel 1996, 291 et seq.; Sielke 2007). If the examination of maintenance debtors in the 1980s is conceptualized as a gender history, this contemporary negotiation of gender politics needs to be taken into account, as well as being distinguished from the claim of the early men's movement to bring men back to the center of attention. Especially the approach of intersectionality bears the potential to shed light on masculinities as both inscribed and entrenched in a relational order of gendered identifications, as Jürgen Martschukat has recently pointed out again (Martschukat 2015).

The term intersectionality has been widely used since Kimberlé Crenshaw coined it at the end of the 1980s. The concept has been adopted and developed further by Critical Race and Queer scholars and influenced cultural historiography throughout the course of the 1990s (Crenshaw 1989; Bührmann 2009; AG Queer Studies 2009; Knapp 2013). An intersectional approach addresses the mutual interconnectedness of seemingly different identities – it draws on identity axes of race, class, and gender within socio-cultural orderings. These differentiations play a decisive role for the consideration of the father's 'indebted self.' If gender relations are not governed by distinct oppositions, masculinities too must be situated in multi-relational entanglements. This observation directs attention towards the varying concepts within those identity patterns. In the mid-1990s, Raewyn Connell claimed that, in Western societies, we ought to deal with a plural set of masculinities wherein different models are organized in a hierarchical gender system (Connell 1995). Critical cultural studies on masculinities following Connell's insights do not square with the objective of the early men's movement of the second half of the 1970s, namely, to resurrect some sort of essential manhood fighting for men's rights and public attention, quite the contrary (Martschukat and Stieglitz 2008, 77 et seq.). Thus, from a critical perspective, we are able to focalize the reproduction of hegemonic patterns of masculinity (Casale and Forster 2006).

As I have emphasized above, a scenario of masculinity in crisis had been historically implemented and staged in the mid-1970s. The men's movement revitalized manhood in a specific way and deployed the trope of 'crisis' to push its agenda. This strategy needs to be analysed as historically productive rather than taken seriously as an affirmative crisis in terms of a representation of reality (Krämer and Mackert 2010, 267 et seq.). The analysis of alimony-owing fathers will reveal that the central individuals are intersectional figures that

appear within the setting of a narrative structured by power (see Finzsch 2011). Nevertheless, the contemporary effort to hold fathers economically responsible for alimony is an outcome of the proclaimed crisis and reproduced a normative notion of the male breadwinner in the United States of the 1970s and 1980s (Krämer 2012; Martschukat 2013).⁵

It is a pivotal issue whether this ‘crisis’ is conceived of as a real crisis of male subjects in terms of Raewyn Connell’s ideal of hegemonic masculinity, or whether scholars deconstruct this proclaimed ‘crisis’ as a very productive and performative strategy within the contested gender order. In *Manhood in America*, which became a standard reference after its publication in 1996, Michael Kimmel assumes that manhood has been indeed and truly in crisis in contemporary US history. However, as other authors have already criticized, this exclusively refers to the hegemonic model of masculinity. At the same time, criticism cannot continue to reclusively deny the existence of a clear-cut hegemonic model. Furthermore, critics should point out how productive staging a crisis of masculinity can be. Literary scholar Sally Robinson, for instance, refers to it as a “cultural currency” (Robinson 2000). Ines Kappert has worked out the enduring influence of masculinity crisis on (and in) popular discourse (Kappert 2008). One further chapter of this work could deal with indebted fathers of the 1980s. In the discourses, circling around ‘delinquent fathers’ and ‘deadbeat dads,’ differences among men, fathers, and criminals were produced.⁶ The associated subject formations became manifest in prosecution practices. By affirming the hegemonic ideal of a solvent breadwinner a subaltern class of indebted fathers – largely poor and black men – has been produced. Hence inequalities need to be examined from an intersectional perspective focusing on entanglements of gender, race and class. More general, the diverseness of conditions that debts impose on different people needs to be taken into account (Krämer 2016). By taking difference and different social positions within the US consumer’s debt market into account, I will turn to the second layer of the subject position “father who owes.”

3. Guilt and the Indebted Self in US History

Whereas studies on the history of finance have prospered since the recent financial crisis, indebtedness has been the subject of research long before 2008. Some studies can serve as stepping stones for further research since the crisis did not change the history of financialization per se. However, studies taking

⁵ See a special issue of the journal *L'Homme* that deals with the crisis of masculinity in different historical contexts where the discursive formation emerged (Hämmerle and Opitz-Belakhal 2008).

⁶ See for a historiographic reflection and theoretical conceptualization of the term “delinquency” Mackert (2014, 283).

social differences among borrowers into account are rare. Furthermore, there is a lack of perspectives considering both the everyday-life stories of debtors and creditors.⁷ Recent publications, such as the majority of the books on indebtedness and the culture of debts in the United States, revolve around US society in the twentieth century. From the big picture of societal debts and over-indebted societies, the question trickles down as to what debts meant to different people. With maintenance-owing fathers in mind, the question comes to the fore that there is a persistent moral dimension to this story – a differentiation among good debtors and bad defaulters which has been widely neglected by recent scholars. How come? An implicit orientation along middle-class ideals in the few accounts on everyday-life stories on debt dismissed the realm of radical social differences that could modify the broader picture on the experiences of borrowing. Hence, the question who profits from which cash flow could guide historical research more directly, for example, if we take the concept of hegemony into account as it has been worked out and presented by Laclau and others (Laclau 2002; Becker 2009; Habermann 2010).

There is one study addressing economic failure historically dealing explicitly with the term ‘deadbeat.’ – It is an “uncommon history of America’s financial disasters” that Scott Reynolds Nelson recounts according to the subtitle of his study on credit practices, loan defaults, and financial panics in the United States from the Revolution up to the 1930s. *A Nation of Deadbeats* shows that the idea, as well as the practice of defaulting loans, and financial loss of supposedly reliable debtors is neither new since the financial crisis in 2008 nor solely an invention of the twentieth-century private consumer’s practices (Nelson 2012). Nelson tracks defaulters and deadbeats, figures intertwined in stories of unfulfilled and forgotten debts through US history from the post-Revolutionary period until the Wall Street Crash of 1929 (ibid., 207 et seq.). But in terms of a broader diachronic historical context, the question remains of what happened to the figure of the “deadbeat” thereafter. How was it employed in the course of the twentieth century to dismiss different groups, to signify economic or moral defaults? There are only a few studies examining the cultural history or the everyday stories of failures, failing breadwinners, or the like, at least as far as the “deadbeat dad” is concerned (Sandage 2005). The interconnectedness of economic reason, the history of failing responsibility, deadbeat fatherhood, and masculinity up until the 1980s remains a missing link. Fatherhood and breadwinning correspond with a threat of failing ‘as man,’ to incur guilt as a defaulting breadwinner that revolves

⁷ An exception is certainly *Debt for Sale* published by Brett Williams, in which he surveys the credit system in the United States throughout the second half of the 20th century (Williams 2004). The economist Robert Manning, who conceptualized a similar story already in 2000, presented his assessment under the title *Living with Debt* in 2005 and again built his argument on a broader data basis. This study sheds light on the different positions among varying social groups in the US in terms of credit access, opportunities, and dangers that come with borrowing or owing money (Manning 2000, 2005).

around the term “deadbeat” (see Troilo 2014). In the course of the second half of the twentieth century, concepts of masculinity and appropriate male roles became closely interconnected with the political ordering and ideal leadership (Cuordileone 2005). Thus, the linkage between an ideal version of US masculinity and the political order – as instable as it is – appears performatively contested when it comes to discourses about failing men addressed by the term “deadbeat dad.”

So, what kind of economic history can accommodate the maintenance-owing fathers of the 1980s who emerged as guilty individuals and unreliable debtors, unworthy of economic, moral and social credit? The culture of credit in political structures means different things to different people, which is addressed for instance by studies like Louis Hyman’s *Debtor Nation* (Hyman 2011). By convincingly historicizing the origins and the engagement of the modern credit system in US society, Hyman’s work provides us with a deeper understanding of the role of political protagonists and bureaucrats in the deregulation of financial markets, the effects on consumer practices, and the moral default in the last third of the twentieth century. He describes, for instance, how the “Housing Act,” aimed at helping lower-class buyers acquiring property in inner cities, caused a boom in the 1970s’ credit markets (Hyman 2011, 220 et seq.). In a similar vein, credit cards became a profitable and expanding market from the 1980s to the 1990s. By showing how the system changed its face and deepened ethnic and class discrimination at the same time, daily practices, economic structures, as well as shifts in body politics come to the fore (Hyman 2011, 240 et seq.). The idea that constant indebtedness is the most profitable way to steadily accumulate interest is the link to the expansion of consumer credit in the 1980s. This made credits, loans, and permanent indebtedness basically acceptable for marginalized groups, women, and minorities. But it also fostered a political practice to mask social differences. More generally, privatizing the risks to default loans obscured social differences in the 1970s (Soederberg 2014). In the light of this critical success story of the rise of consumer credit, the loan defaulter becomes the ubiquitous peril to the system. Besides the above-described men’s movements’ effort to mark ordinary men as victims of cultural shifts in contemporary US history, this is the other strand that makes “deadbeat dads” such pivotal figures in understanding the embattled societal order of the 1980s. They were marked as the failing men, the example of a freely chosen irresponsible subject in an opaque culture of diffuse economic relations.

As sociologist Greta Krippner shows in her genealogy of the financial market, differences within the credit market have been contested in emancipative critiques on discrimination since the 1970s (Krippner 2011). She examines how and why credit conditions were different, and she unfolds what different social and gendered positions meant to the conditions of borrowing. In her reading – and this is explosive if we call to mind the hounded fathers of the 1980s – the fight of different groups to get access to (or at least to decrease the limits of) credit provoked authorities to diminish regulation and accelerate financial

markets further to cater to consumers with questionable financial resources. Krippner, as well as other authors, describe how the interplay of cultural shifts and economic impacts had unintended consequences for emancipation efforts and paradoxically worked for a system based on social (and economic) deregulation (Soederberg 2014). By the turn of the decades from 1970s to the 1980s, a new system was established in which “living on the card” became the standard for consumer citizens (Cohen 2003; Hyman 2011, 131). The question remains what the credit practices that Krippner, Hyman and others have convincingly unfolded for the culture of the 1970s meant to individuals, social groups, and society after the far-reaching retreat of government in the 1980s. Indebted and therefore morally coded delinquent fathers are affiliated with this discourse, which became prevalent through the media, in courts and even reached the living rooms of many people – be they directly involved in the struggle or not.

What images of guilt and default had already been produced and connected to over-indebted people in the course of the developing twentieth-century consumer credit markets? In the following passages I would like to show how the discourse on maintenance debtors shaped a silhouette, a media image of certain indebted father figures, and how TV news presented a distinct reality of default, expropriation, and prosecution to the public.

4. Father's Day is Every Day

In August 1980, an NBC report opened with two stern-looking officers who were searching for fathers in Indianapolis coming into the foreground. The wanted men had failed to pay child support, reporter Denise Baker explained. About 5,000 delinquent dads were missing. Only when finding themselves seriously threatened with legal action, most of them would pay their dues; a young attorney explained, “one of the worst things to go to jail for is lack of child support” (NBC, Sunday, August 3, 1980, *Delinquent Fathers*).⁸ Different men were thus subpoenaed to appear in court in order to be reminded of their duties. One of these men expressed remorse, another maintenance debtor seemed unrepentant. The latter claimed he did not know what he had done wrong. Reporter Denise Baker explained that the effort and all the paperwork that had gone into summoning these biological dads would doubtlessly pay off for the community because ninety percent of the mothers lived on welfare with their children. Thus, if the fathers would pay, social assistance could be cut. This would save money for the state, her account ran. Men appeared on screen, being brought to a court

⁸ The discourse analysis for this article makes use of the *Vanderbilt Television News Archive*, wherein the TV news of ABC, CBS, and NBC are searchable via key words – see: <<http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/>> (Accessed July 10, 2015). The parts of the newscasts can be located by the date and the keywords within the online archive.

building, and the voice-over explained, “Fathers who have trouble understanding that [they] are sent to jail to think it over” (ibid.).

Particularly the evening newscasts of the big three – ABC, CBS, and NBC – delivered seemingly reasonable and rational views reaching into almost every living room each and every day.⁹ Apparently, following the television coverage at the beginning of the 1980s, justice increasingly began to get a hold of men lacking the ‘right attitude’ or the financial means. Things seemed not too well when it came to feelings of paternal responsibility. Henceforth, fatherhood is a historical category prescribing norms of behaviour in the private, public, and political spheres. And even though fathers and fatherhood, the ideal as well as the subaltern identities on the margins, are subject to historical change and to permanent discursive variations in modern history of the United States, the formation is part of the gender order and its normalizing strategies (Martschukat 2013). In the 1980s, the societal persona of the father was associated with terms like security, leadership, and individual responsibility. As scholars have asserted repeatedly, the function to guarantee security and exercise familial leadership was inscribed at the heart at the father’s role in the Reagan years, because this ability was a key requirement in the contemporary notion of moral leadership (Krämer 2015a). Against the backdrop of this ideal, displaying a lack of responsibility, like the so-called “deadbeat dads,” appeared as a negative model, an ultimate bad example. The topic was inscribed and culturally entrenched simultaneously via the news coverage of tracking down men short on alimony payments. Paradoxically, the issue raised in the women’s liberation movement, namely, that single mothers should not be in danger of falling into poverty, had given rise to the demand for a strong father capable, responsible, and not only willing to take the lead in the family but first and foremost capable of leadership in neoliberal society. In this view, the primacy of masculinity had been re-established through the example of maintenance debtors and publicly denouncing the delinquents as “deadbeat dads.” The negative example implied ideals of proper leadership. In this view denouncing delinquent fathers helped to re-center the hegemonic model of a white, masculine breadwinner. In its wake, class and race distinctions were strongly reaffirmed.

The story came to a head in summer 1984 when delinquent fathers were repeatedly accused of not taking responsibility by the media – CBS proclaimed, “Father’s day is every day!” (CBS, Friday, June 15, 1984, Child Support / Delinquent Fathers). When, on June 15, 1984, CBS ran this story, not everybody was happy with the way the world was turning. Dan Rather explained that father’s day ought to be an occasion for children to honor their fathers and for fathers to care about their kids, but for some it was a bitter day as the journalist noted.

⁹ Television had gained the status of an opinion-forming medium of sorts at latest by the 1970s (see Skewes and Black 2006). On the role of television for in gender politics, I have reflected in another article more densely – see Krämer (2015, 43-62).

Initially, the programme showed children who were drawing pictures, making father's day presents. CBS reporter Terry Drinkwater unfolded how millions of kids would bring home presents of this kind to express love and affection, but there were eight and a half million fathers in the United States who did not live at home in the first place. Two million of these absent fathers were paying only a small amount of their due child support or did not pay anything at all. Throughout the past years, American fathers had owed their relatives enormous amounts of money. In 1984 alone, these men were in total "four billion Dollars delinquent" as Drinkwater subsumed the magnitude of moral deviance and guilt in US fathers. A court room zoomed into focus. Judges would call them "deadbeat dads" according to the journalistic commentary.

The programme delineated the case of a sad-looking black man. He was three thousand dollars short on child support. His wife said in court that he had not paid since he had decided to live like a bachelor again. A little child with a baby's bottle appeared on screen. The defendant declared that, since his wife had denied him to see his child, he had withheld the child support check. She appeared upset, objecting that "I've never – and I would put my hands on a bible – made it difficult for him to see his son!" (ibid.). The reporter commented that the number of attorneys specializing in the enforcement of maintenance debt had grown, and that one of these specialists had explained that it was most efficient to just seize the assets that everybody had. This was the way to get a hold of delinquent fathers. His income could be garnished or property confiscated, as the reporter cited the expert. The camera zoomed in on a luxurious housing complex with a tennis court before the reporter appeared leaning on a car, ironically remarking that an automobile could be seized, which would apparently be a suitable method especially in California for there were so many cars and also more delinquent dads than elsewhere in the United States (ibid.). Mr. Nicholson, a white father, was shown in front of the hood of his vehicle repairing the car. Reportedly, he had experienced an effective sanction since he had been 23,000 dollars in debt for child support for his two sons over the past nine years. Now he had been sentenced to jail for one year. The mechanic was upset about the stiff punishment and declared, "I'm guilty. I'm saying the sentence was unduly harsh and justice is not being served here. The tax payer is not being served. I'm certainly not being served. My children are not being served!" (ibid.). The district attorney said that a father who spent some time imprisoned had learned a lot – especially that outstanding accounts were taken seriously. Once these men were out of prison, they would usually pay, as far as the experience of the jurist was concerned. Reporter Drinkwater remarked that the demand to pursue fathers to make them pay originally came from the ranks of the women's movement. One organisation had produced a self-help cassette, and the issue had already reached Washington, D.C. A representative declared that there were many people in Congress who would be willing to support a bill against delinquent fathers so that they could go back to their home states and

tell the people they had done something for women. Even Reagan had announced that he planned to sign the bill, Drinkwater reported, before he drew the final line of the coverage summarizing, “calling attention to the fact that when it comes to child support, father’s day is every day!” (ibid.). A Special Segment of NBC fanned out the moral dimension and exemplified the psychological consequences of men’s reluctance to pay financial support in 1985 (NBC, Friday, March 15, 1985, Special Segment (Child Support)).

In the living rooms of American women who had a hard time coping with their ex-husbands’ lack of responsibility, good news about the masculine morale towards responsibility only arrived by the end of the decade of the 1980s, delivered by a recently aired ABC format entitled “American Agenda” (ABC, Wednesday, August 9, 1989, American Agenda (Family: Fathers and Child Support)). Carol Simpson reported that tougher legislation and better coordination among local states and federal authority succeeded in collecting almost double the amount of maintenance debts in the past year. This still was a ‘battle with fathers about alimonies’ as Simpson named the struggle. Thus – just as in 1987 – four billion were still pending. In order to illustrate the consequences, the viewers’ attention was drawn to the case of a single mother whose home was threatened with foreclosure. The insurance company had already terminated the coverage of the car. The mother had expected 400 dollars of child support, but the father of the children hardly ever paid, as reporter Rebecca Chase explained, while the rest of the family was shown playing games at the table. The next take captured the children with “Child Support” banners and the viewers were informed about the fact that 16 million kids were being owed their child support money, many of these creditors having to live in poverty. Subsequently the coverage turned to the responsible taxpayers when reporter Chase appeared in front of a government building in Atlanta elucidating, “The message now going out from nearly every state is that when parents don’t pay, taxpayers do. Rising welfare costs as well as tougher laws have led to a nationwide crackdown on delinquent parents” (ibid.).

The General State Attorney of Texas Jim Maddox said a child that did not have enough money for food, clothing, housing, and health care would be victim to psychic violence – images of arrested men illustrated the newscast. Therefore, delinquent men were imprisoned in Texas, in Indiana records of the most wanted debtors were published in the newspaper, and in Florida even the house of a deadbeat parent had been auctioned. The plot of the coverage suggested a bright future when computer-based systems would have the capacity to spot salaries and monitor payments in order to make unwilling parents support their children. But from a contemporary point of view (in 1989), this seemed only partly a fantasy of complete surveillance. Reporter Chase, however, presented another example of a family that did not profit by any of these efforts. The wife’s ex-husband was not able to hold a job, as the affected single mother explained the problem. The story led the public directly into a court room where a

judge reprimanded the offender. The man was 5,000 dollars short on child support payments and lamented that he would keep making mistakes no matter what he would turn to, whereas the judge responded, “No, the problem is, you’re just too lazy to work, but your wife is not too good to work and support those children, but you are. And people like you deserve going to jail out there, and that’s where you’re going” (ibid.). Eight out of nine men in detention that day began paying their dues immediately once they realized the seriousness of the matter, the coverage summarized. The judge assessed that only a few men had to be kept imprisoned. But number nine bemoaned distraughtly he had no money to pay. He had to stay.

Departing from a relentless case like this one, the programme turned to a man that the enforcement officers did not get a hold of in the first place. The former wife of the delinquent father was shown leafing through a big file on her living room table, complaining that her husband had moved from state to state, and got away ever since. After the reporter had explained that the father was writing postcards from Europe and Hawaii, the daughter complained angrily that he was traveling around the world while the three of them had to live in an apartment with two bedrooms struggling to make a living. The almost grown-up son was shown upset and declared that he could not see how a father would abandon his children (ibid.). The TV viewers’ eyes kept seeing those absentees in the light of the destiny of their supposed victims – children, and ex-wives.

5. Conclusion

The quest for “deadbeat dads” was inscribed through plenty of reports as the moral heart of gender relations in the 1980s. But claims for equal chances, equal pay, and work conditions for women faded into the background. In fact, many mothers faced a far higher risk of falling into poverty due to the prosecution of their ex-partners (Hatcher 2012). Additionally, the emancipatory take on equality was individualized, reduced to and focalized on a certain function within the family. The effort of making biological fathers accountable corresponded with a state withdrawing from balancing uneven social relations. This subject formation reiterated biological essentialism (Butler 1997) – while simultaneously redistributing risks, individualizing them and making poor debtors more vulnerable to sanctions. The state’s retreat from social policies aiming at the equalization of wealth was resonated in the quest for defaulting fathers in the course of the 1980s. Women from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and their families were particularly vulnerable to this policy. The rising debts of some became an essential threat to others, while government retreated from responsibility, pointing to biological accountability as well as imposing harsh punishments on particular groups of defaulting debtors.

From another point of view than the one on a supposed crisis of hegemonic masculinity, the displayed discourse embraces a history of intersectional discrimination. Since the end of the Civil War and throughout the history of segregation and beyond, black men have faced the allegation of acting irresponsibly towards society and their families. Social reformers' well-intentioned gestures in the course of the twentieth century, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, have veered into a judicial prosecution via the neoconservative policies of the 1980s (see Finzsch 2002; Brito 2012). Did the discourse change its face up to the above-mentioned famous Father's Day speech of Senator Barack Obama in 2008, addressing criticism on allegedly irresponsible black male behaviour in the political sphere? The case of Walter Scott outlined at the beginning of this article tragically reminds us of some everyday stories in the discourse on "deadbeat dads" and the fate of responsibility in the contemporary history of the United States of the 1980s. However, the risk of being brought to (in-) justice was not at all distributed equally among different groups in the course of the past thirty-five years.

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